POWER TO THE PEOPLE

May 4, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

"Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit."
I Corinthians 12:4 (RSV)

Scripture
I Corinthians 12:4-13

You know how trying it is to have a dear friend who has a favorite story which he tells, slightly at your expense, and finds a way to work it into the conversation everytime he sees you. A friend of mine can't wait to retell an incident which happened in the family car around noon on Sunday on the way home from church. He and his family are Episcopalians. On the way home on Sunday they pass a large Presbyterian Church with a prominent parking lot. His children often comment on whether or not they are getting home before their friends in that congregation. It's something of a game with them - only they always had a little trouble pronouncing "Presbyterian."

On the infamous morning my friend loves to tell me about, the Presbyterian lot was filled. His young son said: "Look, Dad. We beat the pedestrians this morning!"

I don't think that story is nearly as funny as my Episcopalian friend does. In fact, I tell him that's the kind of thing Anglicans have been saying about Presbyterians ever since English troops chased Scottish covenanters back across the border and up into the hills several centuries ago, and never really did catch them. But that's another story!

He's right, of course. We are, in fact, pretty pedestrian. Our liturgy isn't very fancy. Presbyterians have been known to have major arguments about whether there ought to be candles in church. We call the highest, most powerful office in our church the Clerk, and, nationally, we invest a lot of energy keeping him humble. We don't have bishops, and our delegates to ecumenical assemblies start nervously checking the exits whenever the subject comes up. Our clergy have very little actual authority by themselves. And once a year we affirm it in a rite which is Presbyterianism at its most Presbyterian - the Ordination of Elders and Deacons and the recognition of Trustees.

It is the essence of the Presbyterian idea: It would be more efficient to do it at some other hour. We insist on doing it publically - because very near the heart of this church is this idea that authority and power do not belong exclusively to the professionals, the ones in the black robes and Geneva tabs, but the people, the ones in business suits and dresses. It is not simply a gesture. It is not the same, for instance, as

the old Layman's Sunday concept - when nervous doctors, lawyers, teachers or bricklayers were asked to act like clergy. One of the lions of the Presbyterian pulpit a generation ago said that he would invite a doctor or lawyer to preach the sermon when he received a reciprocal invitation to perform surgery on a patient or represent a client in court. It's not quite that clear, of course. Our intentional pedestrianism does not mean to diminish the professional standards of the clergy. In fact, the rite of ordination to the Gospel Ministry is preceded by a rigorous set of standards designed to insure that the one who presumes to stand up and speak to the rest on Sunday morning, at least knows the tools of the trade. There is no reason to demean professionalism and professional expertise in the name of egalitarianism. The late Rosalind Russell used to tell a delightful story on herself. She was on a trans-Atlantic cruise, sitting on a deck chair on a sunny afternoon, beside a man who had a terrible cold - sneezing, blowing his nose, coughing. "I think if you'll go to bed early, drink a lot of fluids, and take two aspirin, you will feel better in the morning," she said. The man did not respond. So she tried again: "My name is Rosalind Russell, you know, I make movies." The man thanked her and said: "And my name is Charles Mayo. I run a medical clinic." (Hoover Rupert in Outlook, 10/23/83, p. 11)

What we have done today is not a gesture. It is liturgy in the best sense, the public dramatization of a deeply believed principle. If there is a Presbyterian genius it is here. It is a corner of the truth we have to offer the Church catholic. The ordination of lay persons means, first, that power belongs with the people and, second, that everybody has a calling, a vocation.

The first of those ideas - that power resides in the people is, as you recognize, the pivotal concept in the political experiment called republican Democracy, and as such one of the most dynamic ideas in Western Civilization. It was conceived long ago, in the Greek city states: it lived briefly in the early Christian church which was radically democratic: it surfaced in the renaissance and emerged surely in the thinking of Martin Luther and John Calvin. It flowered in the 18th Century finding its most elegant expression in Mr. Jefferson's rhetoric about "self-evident truths" and "inalienable rights" and "that to secure those rights governments are instituted...deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." "Power to the People." It wasn't invented in the 60's. It's as old as the Reformation and it's as current as its most recent emergence in the remarkable popular revolution against corrupt power in the Phillipines. The power of that idea in terms of political freedom and its relationship to self determination was documented this week by a government which intentionally withheld information from its own people about a matter of very grave concern to them. As the Times quipped this morning, people in Kansas City know more about the nuclear reactor accident than the people of Kiev. "Power to the people"... it has at least part of its genesis in the experience of those remarkable saints - the first Christians.

In first century Corinth, a Greek city, there was a tiny community of Christians, a church, with which St. Paul carried on a lively correspondence. Those Corinthian Christians were a very interesting bunch: vigorous, contenuous, competitive, assertive, and as soon as they organized themselves into something called a church - ecclesia - they began to argue

about who was more important than whom, whose function was more critical, and about who would be in charge.

When Paul heard about the argument he wrote a letter: "there are many gifts," he told them, many skills, talents, abilities. God needs them all. God gave them all. None is more important, more necessary, more holy than any of the others." In fact, the church is like a body - dependent on each part performing the function it is best suited to perform.

The point is that there is no ecclesiastical caste system. There are a variety of ways to be a Christian: no one way is more pleasing to God than any other way. Unfortunately, much of that has been lost on the church. Very early in its life, the church borrowed two popular ideas from the Graeco-Roman world in which it happened to be living. The first was that power and authority are given by God to a few select individuals - the King, for instance - who then exercises it in relation to the rest of the people. He has it. They don't. The second idea was that Greek notion that there are two worlds - the secular and the sacred. Religion belongs to the sacred, distinct, apart from the material, real world.

When those two ideas combined - the hierachical notion of leadership and the division between religion and the rest of life, the result is, simply two levels of Christianity, two kinds of Christians - clergy and laity. Suddenly the laity - which is from a good Greek word, Laos - which means - all the people of God - become laymen and laywomen which has come to mean - amateur. And clergy - which comes from another good word, a close translation of which is "servant" - suddenly become the professionals. One group - sacred by function, needs to be apart, live apart from the world in order to handle sacred matters. The other group lives thoroughly in the world, but is now dependent on the first group for access to the sacred.

It was assumed further that these specialists, clergy, had a vocation, a calling, given by God. The laity were less fortunate, but freer to pursue the good life on the basis of other considerations.

That has been a very durable heresy. Twenty centuries after the fact we are stil operating on a slightly modified version of it. Clergy, it is assumed rather universally, should have been called by God to their profession. Professors, mechanics, and homemakers come to them by an altogether different route. Clergy are religious specialists.: the universal assumption seems to be that they know more about God and can talk to God better, or at least longer, than the amateurs. And somewhere inside all of us there lingers that old notion that to be a serious Christian, particularly a pastor, is not to be too worldly. We still don't know whether we're being flattered or insulted when someone says to us "why, you don't look like a minister." Charles Merrill Smith has written a wonderful parody of the heresy under the title "How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious" in which he advises that clergy will gather up in themselves a host of characteristics which advertise - "Here is a person of much prayer, disentangled from the soiling concerns which obsess most people. If you have a taste for bright clothes, you must ruthlessly suppress it" he advises, "and for recreation, develop a fondness for croquet."

The tragedy here is not the stereotype of clergy, but the demeaning of the laity. The tragedy is that the Protestant experiment was born in an idea so revolutionary it would have erased the distinctions within the people of God. One historan observes: "Every great religious awakening has been a revolt against authority." [H. T. Hodgkin, in E. Trueblood, Your Other Vocation, p. 35] "The ministry, said John Calvin, belongs to the Church. The ministry is not an order of men or women, it is what the church does. All are ministers. The job of the clergy is to serve the church, help the whole people of God to do ministry.

At the time of the Reformation it was called "the Priesthood of all Believers." We Protestants have been inclined to interpret that smugly to mean that we don't need a priest. But that's not it at all. What the Reformers wanted to recover and teach anew is that every Christian has a ministry. "The priesthood of all" William Willimon wrote recently, "does not mean that each person is his or her own priest but each person is his or her neighbor's priest." [What's Right With the Church, p. 127]

I continue to believe that this idea, to which we pay occasional lip service - that power belongs to the people and that each person is called by God, has a vocation, is one of the most dynamic ideas around...

Consider, for instance, the broader implications. We are willing to believe that God calls people to be clergy and that to be a pastor is a holy calling. But what if God is equally interested in politics, and homemaking, and medicine? What if God's call is to live responsibly and faithfully in God's world, and what if it comes to every person and what if the way it comes is through the particular gifts and skills and abilities and potentialities God has given to each of us? That, it seems to me is an incredibly dynamic idea. "...That ours is God's world in all its parts...that the way in which we grow potatoes is as much a matter of God's will as is the way we pray or sing." (Elton Trueblood)

The radical message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that God really loves this world. The world is where God's work is done, not just inside church buildings. The policeman who settles a domestic dispute, the doctor who sets a broken arm, the teacher who does not give up on her bored and indifferent student, the parent patiently loving a child, or cooking a meal, the repairman making the refrigerator work again, the typist preparing the report, the custodian vacuuming the floor...the Gospel declares that all of it is holy work, - priestly work, vocation - because it is work in a world made holy by God's love. Regardless of how you earn your living or spend your time, it is of interest to God.

In terms of specifically Christian witness you have far more creditiblity and therefore power than any clergyman or woman. When the Christian word is said or lived in the world by a layperson, it is far more effective and communicative and powerful. You are front-line soldiers.... The simple fact is that many of you spend your time in places where the important issues of life are resolved. Many of you are involved in making life in this city - state - nation - liveable, just and human. The vital decisions are made in your offices, healing happens in your operating rooms, truth is conveyed in your classrooms, love is shared and celebrated in your homes. You are called to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ

there. Your vocation is to be his man, his woman, in your world - which is the world for which he lived and died.

My observation is that many of us can believe this - about other people. We can believe that God has called the preacher to preach and the physician to heal. We can believe that God has called the parent to parent, even the programmer to program. But we stumble over the suggestion that God calls us. The reason is that it hasn't happened for us. Or if it has, we haven't heard it, or we're listening for the wrong thing. We have not had a mystical experience or heard a voice telling us what to do - and so we assume others have and that whatever we decide to do apparently doesn't matter to God one way or the other.

Because I believe that is true for many, perhpas, most of us, I want to make a suggestion. If I understand what St. Paul was telling the Corinthians it is that every person has a calling - and that God gives every person a gift. What I want to suggest is that God calls you and me not necessarily by a mystical voice or mysterious experience but precisely by the gifts he gives us, that our calling, our vocation, is to live fully and faithfully, by using - putting to work - whatever it is God has given us. That is the greatest thing in life: to know what one has been given; to understand that God has given me gifts, abilities, skills: to recognize what they are, and actually to put them to work. That's what it means to have a calling.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink says that the fundamental question for the first one half of our pilgrimage is "what is the meaning of my life?" The question for the second one half of life is "With the time I have left, how can I make a difference." Put slightly differently, the task for the first half of life is coming to terms with your gifts - what you have been given - what you can do. The task for the second half then is doing it - living out your vocation....

We have mentors, all of us, who have shown us what that means. Let me tell you about one of mine... wife of a colleague, good friend, parishoner. Mary had fought off a malignancy some years ago, had raised her children and was planning her second career. The malignancy returned - this time with a vengeance. Her time was very limited. She discussed it with her physician and pastors and friends and family and decided that she would not spend her time remaining in the hospital. It was a very tough decision: none of us who were close to her was totally comfortable with it. But it was hers. She made another decision - and it was that in whatever time she had left, she would make a difference. In the middle of all that her congregation elected and ordained her as an Elder. In private conversation with me - she laughed about her agenda and how she had no reason to hold back because she had nothing to fear any longer and she warned me that the difference she wanted to make would not always make life simple for me - or the church.

And so Mary began to speak and act with a kind of gentle but complete commitment to living out her own gifts. She drove to a group home and piled six mentally handicapped adults into her car and marched them into church every Sunday and embarrassed her church into arranging a class and a whole program. She asked questions and pushed and prodded on economic

justice issues until she got her church's attention on the Nestle Boycott. She wrote letters and asked embarrassing questions about the inconsistency of church policy in gay rights. She said to me, "when I die you're going to be relieved" and she was right. But she showed us - clearly and strongly something church people - Christian people need to see... - how power is exercised in weakness - how power does belong to people not just the ones who decide to change the world and become president or the CEO or a prominent person in the process - but all the people: the ones who are not going to become much more than they are now... - and how each of us is called by God to use whatever gifts we have been given - to live fully, faithfully, victoriously.

May I suggest that there is nothing more powerful - in God's terms, and nothing more joyful than to know what God has given, to claim it as one's own, and to put it to work? Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you are the giver of every good and perfect gift. We give you thanks for skills and abilities, for sensitivities and inclinations which are personal and particular to each one of us. We give you thanks for your call to live fully and faithfully for you. We ask the courage to answer in obedience. Bless us - in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.